

pills, and they're always giving me that baby stuff. Why can't they just gimme a pill?" She violently emphasizes the last word while imploringly holding her open hands skyward, like a seasoned New York City cab driver. "Don't worry, Joyce, I'll make sure that the only Tylenol you get is a pill. No baby stuff for you." She flashes a little smile. I go to turn off the light above her bed, but she balletically flicks off the switch and lies down in one motion. "Oh, Dr Flores, don't forget that you guys promised me a real breakfast tomorrow." "No problem, Joyce. You can count on it. Just save me a little bit." I see her turn her head slightly in the dark. "Maybe. I'll think about it." I walk toward the doorway, and almost make it out. "Oh, Dr Flores!" she shouts. I turn and walk back in the room towards her bed. "What, Joyce?" She pauses momentarily. "Good night, Dr Flores." I reflect in the darkness. "Good night, Joyce."

My colleagues ask me why I like working with children with cancer. These children teach me about dealing with death. Children express feelings in the purest human form. They are not fettered by the propriety and repression of

adults. I learn from the fearful children, the ones who sense death's imminence despite their parents' well-intentioned attempts at cover-ups. From them I reaffirm life's immediacy and vitality and how integral a part of life family is. And I learn from the determined strength of children like Joyce. They teach me that you must defy life's misfortunes with fundamental passions. Joyce's insistence on dignity is the flower that grows in spite of the desert.

* * *

"Lessons From the Practice" presents a personal experience of practicing physicians, residents, and medical students that made a lasting impression on the author. These pieces will speak to the art of medicine and to the primary goals of medical practice—to heal and to care for others. Physicians interested in contributing to the series are encouraged to submit their 'lessons' to the series' editors.

JONATHAN E. RODNICK, MD
STEPHEN J. MCPHEE, MD
Series' Editors

ONE CANDLE AND TWO RED BALLOONS

A black flame of resentment
Smolders in the twigs of passing years,
Crackles in the tall grass of middle age:

My son will never
Be one again,
And I am growing old.

His birthday candle
Flickered at blue icing
Just when the nurse called that night.

I had to go. We tried for hours
To save edematous lungs.
I went home almost as dead as them,

Found some colored paper, a ribbon,
Red balloons popped like shreds of pleura
Scattered in the quietness where my son slept.

I went to the kitchen,
Found a clean knife and plate,
Ate a piece of chocolate cake alone.

He is now grown, and
The old man died so much more easily
Than the memory of that one candle.

Yet I chose this work,
Would choose again this way
To become old myself.

ERIC DYER, MD©
Nashville, Tennessee